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# Duivelse Bezetenheid, beschreven door dokter Johannes Wier, 1515-1588 (review)


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Cohn shows one sign of uneasiness with this gap in his argument: at one point in his conclusion he himself briefly acknowledges seventeenth-century evidence of huge plague mortalities (in Italy, not England) that baldly contradict his epidemiologic "trend," and he suggests that they might have been "brought on either by a new strain of the disease or from a loss in human immunity derived from the body's previous success" (pp. 239–40). It is of course true that diseases can change over time—this is another of the perils of offering retrospective diagnoses. But it is in Cohn's interest to maintain the stability of late-medieval plague, lest the differences he sees between it and the modern version be explained away by a mutation, and so a few pages later he abandons his hypothetical *virus ex machina* and reverts to the claim that "over its first hundred years and *probably* into the eighteenth century the Black Death appears remarkably consistent in many of its traits" (p. 248, my emphasis). The inconsistencies and the self-imposed arbitrary limitations of this book make it impossible to be convinced by its argument—though it is a useful reminder to us that to identify the *magna mortalitas* as bubonic plague is itself a retrospective diagnosis calling for a corresponding caution.

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Jan Jacob Cobben. *Duivelse Bezetenheid, beschreven door dokter Johannes Wier, 1515–1588*. Rotterdam: Erasmus Publishing, 2002. 208 pp. Ill. €30.00 (paperbound, 90-5235-161-9).

In 1960, Jan Jacob Cobben (1926–98) published a well-received dissertation on Johannes Wier's ideas on witchcraft, demonic possession, and magic as expounded in his *De praestigiis daemonum* (*Johannes Wier: Zijn opvattingen over bezetenheid, hekserij en magie,* 1960, translated by S. Prins, slightly abridged, as *Jan Wier, Devils, Witches and Magic,* 1976). Cobben's professional career as a radiologist kept him from further medical-historical research, but after his retirement he resumed his inquiries into the life and work of Wier and was bent on publishing a translation and an analysis of many of the cases of demonic possession collected by Wier. Unfortunately, he could not complete this work, and his translations are now published posthumously. The book contains a brief memoir of the life and work of Jan Cobben, an introductory study on Wier and his *De praestigiis* by Hans de Waardt, Cobben's Dutch translation of Wier's case studies, and finally a few relevant sections from the 1960 dissertation.

The importance of Wier's work for medical history was already emphasized in the introduction to the first complete English translation of his book.[1] Wier

1. *Witches, Devils and Doctors in the Renaissance: Johann Weyer, De praestigiis daemonum.* Ed. George Mora and Benjamin G. Kohl, trans. John Shea, foreword by John Weber (Binghamton, N.Y.: Center for Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1991), pp. lxxvii–lxxix.

coupled his medical knowledge and profound humanitarian interest in the lives and fates of common people with a careful empirical scrutiny of the physical and social conditions of the patients with whom he was confronted. It was this attitude, encoded in many anecdotes and case descriptions scattered throughout his highly erudite treatment of demons, witches, and the demonically possessed, that drew the attention of later historians and made them aware of the role of mental illness in cases of witchcraft and possession. Wier's empirical and psychiatric interests clearly surface in the many cases that Cobben singled out. The selected passages from Cobben's dissertation, chosen by Hans de Waardt, provide relevant background information for a better understanding of Wier's ideas; unfortunately, they cannot make up for the lack of the annotations, elucidations, and analyses that Cobben originally planned for his translation.

Hans de Waardt, a Dutch historian who in 1991 published a fine dissertation on the social context of witchcraft beliefs in Holland (*Toverij en samenleving: Holland 1500–1800*), was faced with the difficult task of maintaining the coherence of the book. His introductory study does not go into medical details. He provides information on Wier's biography, lays some emphasis on the indeterminacy of his nationality (German or Dutch; a point of minor interest) and on the historical reliability of his documented cases, and finally deals with what he calls Wier's world picture, which is essentially a reconstruction of his social and intellectual environment.

Wier's relationship with his sons and brothers is relevant to the translated case studies since he relied on them for information, but one brother in particular, Matthijs, is an interesting source, de Waardt believes, for his ideas. Matthijs was a "spiritualist," meaning an adherent of the belief that man by being reborn would regain Adam's prelapsarian endowments and could even achieve divine perfection. Wier's publisher Oporinus was associated with the spiritualist prophet David Joris, who contributed financially to the publication of the works of Guillaume Postel. The correspondence between Johannes and Matthijs shows that the former had at least some interest in the spiritualist movement, though it cannot be ascertained whether he actually belonged to the Family of Love, the spiritualist sect founded by Hendrik Niclaes. On the basis of these associations (to which Wier's apprenticeship under Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa can be added) De Waardt tries to make a case for a distinct spiritualist influence on Wier's work. He goes even further by suggesting that spiritualism was a motive for writing *De praestigiis* (cf. *The Discoverie of Witchcraft,* whose author, Reginald Scot, may have belonged to an English branch of the Family of Love). The evidence he adduces is entirely circumstantial, and mainly boils down to the spiritualists' disbelief in Catholic ritual and their tendency to regard disease as a purely natural consequence of the Fall of man. De Waardt clearly overstates his case and, worse still, ignores other, more plausible sources of Wier's work—namely, his extensive reading in Renaissance scholarship (Agrippa, Pomponazzi, and Cardano, to mention only a few), the influence of Protestantism, and, most important of all, his own critical and empirical attitude.

Johannes Wier is rightly remembered as an early opponent of the witchhunt. Though he acknowledges the workings of demons, he believes that their powers

are limited. He discredits standard beliefs in the witches' Sabbath and the devil's pact, and (as a Lutheran) claims that the Catholic exorcist ritual is ineffective. He blames doctors, priests, and magicians for their superstition and trickery, and does much to find rational explanations (which in his case include demonic illusions) for cases of possession: alleged witches should be cured, not burned. The present book offers an intriguing collection of Wier's case studies, and for some of them De Waardt supplies interesting background information. A fuller analysis of these cases, however, and especially a proper appreciation of Wier's careful and analytical approach, must await the efforts of future scholars.

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William G. Naphy. *Plagues, Poisons and Potions: Plague-Spreading Conspiracies in the Western Alps, c. 1530–1640*. Social and Cultural Values in Early Modern Europe. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2002. xiv + 242 pp. Ill. $74.95, £55.00 (cloth, 0-7190-4640-8); $29.95, £16.99 (paperbound, 0-7190-4641-6).

From its first appearance during the fourteenth century until well into the eighteenth century, Europe continued to be beset by epidemic waves of bubonic plague. Despite its lengthy cohabitation with human beings across all European nations, nothing was known of the epidemiology and etiology of the bubonic plague until as late as the 1890s. It is therefore hardly surprising to find out that none of the precautions taken across Europe was particularly effective in stopping the spread of the disease. Not knowing if the disease was airborne or spread through contact with plague victims (neither of which corresponds to the real cause of contagion: its transmission through rodents via fleas), European towns struggled with decisions on how best to contain the epidemic. Milan was the first northern Italian city to establish a public health board to deal with the epidemic, and this model was subsequently adopted by all major northern Italian cities. Despite never implementing permanent health boards, cities across the Alps adopted the norms and measures that had been long established in Italy.

Some readers will be familiar with Alessandro Manzoni's dramatic account of the 1630s cases of plague-spreading in Milan in his *I promessi sposi* and *Storia della colonna infame*. William Naphy's book takes as its subject earlier cases of plague-spreading in towns across the Alps, concentrating in particular on Geneva. The first five chapters explore a rich array of archival and printed sources that span from 1542, the time of the first plague conspiracy, to 1571. The last chapter is entirely devoted to the diffusion of the plague-spreading phenomenon in other regions of Switzerland and Europe, discussing documented cases in Lausanne, Neuchâtel, the territory of the duchy of Savoy, Lyon, and Milan itself.

Naphy's study of these trials seems to be moved by two historiographic preoc-